

# **NATIVISM, ETHNIC REVIVAL, AND THE REAPPEARANCE OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS IN THE ROC: THE USE OF THE INTERNET IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF TAIWANESE IDENTITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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In their introduction to the book “Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia” the editors Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre make the following remark:

Nation-building requires a very different stance toward the past than does modernization. While commitment to modernization entails rejection of those aspects of a society's past deemed impediments to a rationalized bureaucratic order, nation-building depends on the very opposite move. (...) The process of creating modern nation states, thus, entails two rather contradictory stances towards religion: While the modernizing stance leads to a de-emphasis of ritual practices, the nation-building one leads to the promotion of selected practices and even the invention of new rites.<sup>2</sup>

The contradiction described here and its consequences can currently be very well observed in China's “runaway-province” Taiwan: While the Taiwanese government on one hand side pushes technical, social and political modernization (like for instance the consolidation of the island's young liberal democracy), it encourages on the other hand the development of a multicultural national identity that is independent from China and free from the quasi-colonial pressures of the recent past. In this process, ethnic groups and cultural practices that have long time been disregarded and neglected appear on the surface again. As testimonies of the island's non-Chinese past, especially the cultures of Taiwan's 400 thousand aborigines are highly treasured today – an appreciation that is, however, not so much directed towards their contemporary Christianized living styles than towards their “traditional cultures” that had long time been despised and denied even by Aborigines themselves. But since the

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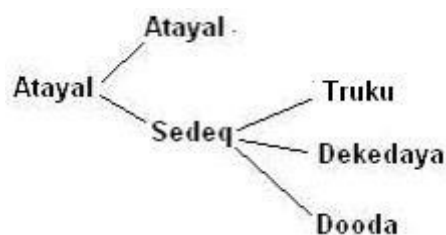
<sup>1</sup> Research for this article has been made possible with the help of the DFG (*German Research Foundation*) that supported the project *Dynamics and Efficacy of Ritual Performance and the Constitution of Socio-Cultural Identity in Taiwan and Morocco* within the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre *Dynamics of Ritual* at Heidelberg University.

<sup>2</sup> Keyes, Kendall, Hardacre 1994: 5.

demonstration of cultural and ethnic particularity has also become the precondition for recognition and the enjoyment of preferential treatment in Taiwanese multiculturalism, a new occupation with the headhunting past has begun today, mostly initiated by ethnic elites who refer to their people's traditional religions as elaborate value systems equal to Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity.

In this contribution, I will focus on the role of the internet in this peculiar process of re-identification and re-ethnification. After the presentation of three relevant websites produced by young aboriginal elites, I will first give a more comprehensive description of the political background in which the development takes place, as this will help us to understand the general logics according to which Taiwanese identities are constructed in Taiwan's contemporary nation-building process. In a further step, I will assess the young intellectual's endeavours in terms of their efficacy in the identity construction of the specific ethnic group. The example I will refer to here is that of the "Truku", an aboriginal group of about 30 thousand people that originally had been classified as a subgroup of a subgroup of the Atayal, one of Taiwan's eleven officially recognized aboriginal groups. In the course of the presidential elections of 2004, however, the Truku succeeded to be recognized as an independent aboriginal group with its own land, its own language and its own budgets – a success that must at least partly be attributed to the extensive representation work of this ethnic group's nativist elites.

**Table 1: Former anthropological classification of Atayal and Atayal subgroups**



### *Aborigine's nativism on the web*

Looking at Tian Guishi's website „The Sedeq Facial Tattoo Culture Studio“, users worldwide are confronted with impressive and exotic pictures: Photographs of old men and

woman with greenish-blue tattoos on chin and forehead, in the case of the men rather decently done, but somewhat more shocking in the case of the women whose lower part of the face is sometimes totally covered by the tattoos.<sup>3</sup> In one of the attached Chinese language articles Tian – himself a member of the Truku-Sedeq – explains the qualifications men and women needed to demonstrate to the ancestor-gods in order to acquire the right to make the tattoos and to marry: Men had to prove their skills in head hunting, while women were expected to have high skills in weaving. Without these qualifications, the ancestor-gods would deny them the passage over the rainbow bridge into the realm of the deceased. Among the stories reported is also that of 90-years old Biyang Lahang, who had observed the bloody scenes of headhunting with her own eyes and who could account for the way the heads were treated after headhunting.

The website cited above is a good example for the way Aboriginal religion is represented by aboriginal intellectuals today. We find references to the high value and the particularity of the dying tattooing culture, to the cultural practice of headhunting and its connected customs, to the devaluation of these customs by the Han in the past decades and to their recent “rehabilitation”. As for his motivation to collect and to exhibit these materials, Tian makes the following statements in an introductory note to his page: He wanted to protect the dying culture of his people from further misunderstandings that had caused so much humiliations and discrimination in past decades. Many people in Taiwan didn’t have any knowledge of their island’s history that was very much shaped by the aborigines.<sup>4</sup> Another motivation for his work was the rapid disappearance of tattooed people: In 1993, when he was people’s representative in the largest Truku-Township, there were still 82 of the tattooed people living. In 1996, however, he found only 34 of them left. As Tian makes clear, he did not fear any hardship in his mission: Even after being hounded by the dogs of his compatriots who did not necessarily share his appreciation of former head hunting culture, he kept on pursuing his documentation work.

An even more impressive example for the above mentioned phenomenon of cultural re-recognition are the music recordings of Pideru Wuga, a Truku-Singer who appears in full –

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<sup>3</sup> The original page could be found at <http://hledu.nhlrc.edu.tw/~tayal/> under the name “The Facial Tattoo of Tayal”. By 2004, it had changed to <http://atayal.hihosting.hinet.net/ptasan/main.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Tian here refers to the anti-Japanese martyr Mona Ludao – a Sedeq-chief who reportedly was the initiator of the Wushe incident in 1930. In that year, Mona was able to mobilize the Sedeq to take part in a collective headhunting raid against the Japanese colonizers and their humiliating and dishonouring conduct. The incident in which more than 100 Japanese were killed was immediately heavily sanctioned by the colonial government.

albeit false – tattoo on his website.<sup>5</sup> In the first song entitled “Head hunting”, Pideru sings in Truku-language:

I am a son of the Truku-Sedeq, I don't fear any trouble.  
I only remember the lesson from our ancestors – I did not forget it until the present day.  
Look: Don't provoke me, don't make fun of me. If you provoke me, I will chop off your head and take it to worship the ancestor-gods. Look at the mark on my head, that's a real man. Don't act wantonly! See! Truku-Sedeq. Uh!  
I invite you to come here. This is the place where my ancestors live. Here you will rest in peace. I also invite your forefathers, brothers and sisters to live here. Uh!

And, in order to prevent any misunderstandings that he had learnt his lesson well, Pideru still provides an additional interpretation below the Chinese translation of the song:

When your blood flows out of your body, all hatred between you and me will vanish. I invite your soul to live here by my side, and I will feed you with millet wine and food. After you have become one of us, you will protect our people together with our ancestor-gods.<sup>6</sup>

If we want to know more details about the philosophy alluded here by Pideru Wuga, we have to look at a Power Point File provided by the Truku teacher Gariyi on the website of his elementary school.<sup>7</sup> In the document entitled “Head Hunting, Tattoos and Headhunting Cloth” we seem to be carried back to the former times of head-hunting: In several video clips integrated into the presentation, tattooed people perform wild dances and whirl around skulls, which they subsequently feed and hail in the way depicted by the old people. The underlying text explains the deeper meaning of the ritual practices performed here and the utensils and colours used. What is not mentioned in the presentation, however, is the origin of these scenes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Pideru Wuga 2002. In personal interviews Pideru admits that the theme of his song has in fact been inspired by the commemorative head hunting rituals of the church elites. However, he simultaneously points out that he does not ideologically support – and this is also indicated by the title of his CD – the Truku-independence-movement of the latter (personal interviews with Pideru 14.4.2003).

<sup>6</sup> See Pideru Wuga 2002. Not only the melody, but also the comments to the head-hunting-ritual are almost identical with the contents of the head-hunting-ritual organized by PCT-elites. However, as Pideru does not refer to “Truku”, but only to “Sedeq” in his main title, this caused some annoyance from the side of the ritual's re-inventor Imi (personal interviews with Pideru 14.4.2003 and with Imi 16.4.2003).

<sup>7</sup> See Gariyi 2003. The document could be found on the webpage of the Fu-shih Elementary School until 2003.

<sup>8</sup> That were filmed at an open cultural event of the Truku in 1991 – the second year of Taiwan nativism – at the East Coast of Taiwan (see below).

### *Austronesian Taiwan*

At first sight, it may be hard to understand what makes aboriginal politicians, artists and school teachers in Taiwan resort to such drastic measures in their endeavour to protect and to mediate the culture of their people to a broader public. The ethnic pride expressed here actually has only a short history: One and a half decades ago, aborigines still belonged to the most despised groups on the island. It was only after a major political shift which followed the inauguration of the first Taiwan-born president in 1990 that Taiwan's Han-Chinese inhabitants re-assessed their relation with the island's "original inhabitants": Had the latter – in correspondence with the homogenization policy of the former government that wanted to recover the mainland – been identified as "a little bit more backward Chinese", they were now – as a consequence of Taiwan's present-day endeavour to free itself from the mainland's incorporation pressure – fully recognised as Malayo-Polynesians and as members of the Austronesian language group that was distributed on the Pacific islands from Madagascar to New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> Representing the "authentic" Taiwanese, the cultures of these people were now deemed extremely valuable in the construction of the so called "Taiwanese subjectivity", a term that denoted the establishment of the islanders' new identity as self-defining and culturally independent "actors". Advocates of Taiwan's independence however, even went further: Responding to the mainland's constant reminders that Taiwan population culturally and ethnically belonged to the mainland, they argued that the Chinese who 400 years ago began to settle on the island had in fact intermixed with these Austronesians who had inhabited Taiwan for at least 6000 years. Testimonies for this kind of discourse can today be found in countless manifests on the internet, for instance in an article by Cai Baiquan in which the Taiwanese are characterized as an "ethnic Austronesian people" on a "Pacific island", differing from the inhabitants of the Chinese mainland in cultural as well as in genetic terms.<sup>10</sup> In the same line of thought, an anthropological theory from the Australian scholar Peter Bellwood (1991) was adopted that argued that Taiwan was in fact the origin and the homeland of all Austronesian peoples. References to this theory can also be abundantly found on the internet.<sup>11</sup>

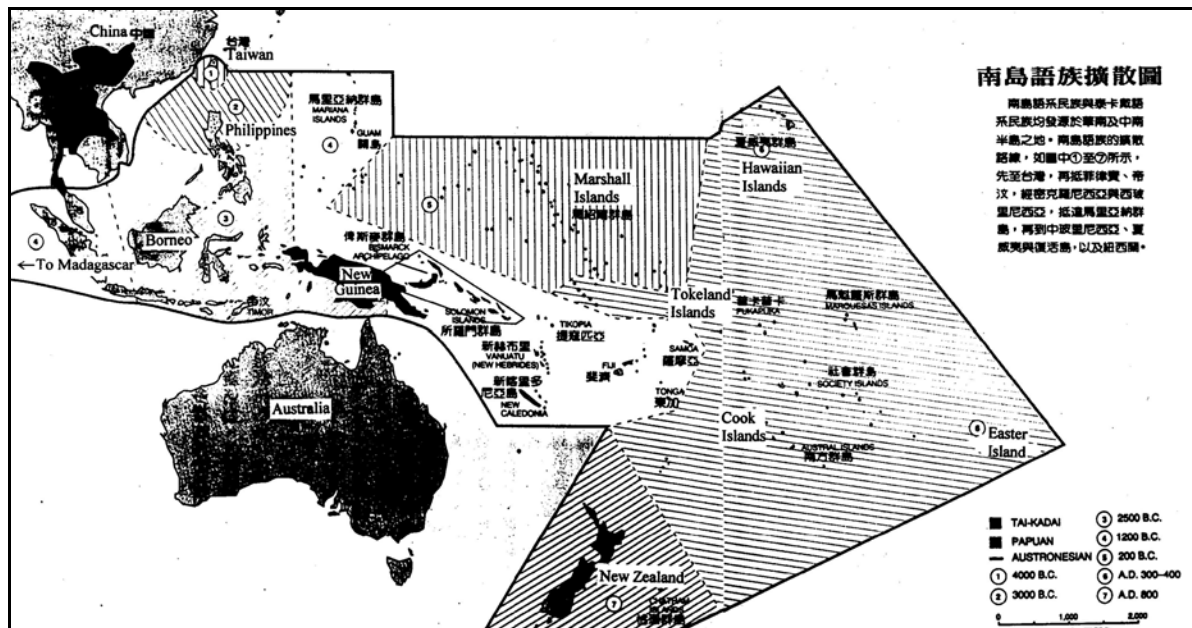
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<sup>9</sup> The official recognition of the former "mountain compatriots" as "Taiwan aborigines" occurred in 1994 (Rudolph 2003b and 2005a).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Cai Baiquan 2003. Some Aboriginal websites today reflect this discourse even in their title, for instance a website entitled "Heirs of the Cloud Jaguar" (*yunbao de chuanren*) that caricaturizes the former slogans "Heirs of the Dragon" (*long de chuanren*) or "Children of the Yellow Emperor" (*yanhuang zisun*).

<sup>11</sup> An example for this discourse and the map shown below see at

Map 1: Austronesian Taiwan



Source: Historical Monthly (Lishi Yuekan) Nr.51, 4/1992: 11. Map has been first published in: Peter Bellwood, 1991, "The Austronesian Dispersal and the Origin of Languages" In: Scientific American 7/1991: 88-93.

With the change of Taiwan's Aborigines status from despised savages to testimonies of a non-Chinese past, a visible change in government policy towards them took place. Contrary to former interdictions to use aboriginal languages, mother languages education was implemented now. The official land and welfare policy towards aborigines was re-assessed, and aborigines were encouraged to recover their traditional names. In 2002, there was even pronounced an official edict that people with a Chinese father and an aboriginal mother could apply for the recognition of their aboriginal status, a right that today more and more common people make use of because such status is linked to land rights and governmental subsidies like school fees.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the government paid special attention to aborigines in large scale "community reconstruction projects" that were established in 1991.<sup>13</sup> With financial help from official side, every single ethnic group was now encouraged to rediscover and to display its ethnic

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<http://twstudy.iis.sinica.edu.tw/preHistory/Austronesian.html>. Taiwan as the origin of the Austronesians is represented by the circle at the northern brink of the arrow that signifies the spread of this language group.

<sup>12</sup> As I show in another contribution, all these efforts of course had not only the aim to demarcate Taiwan culturally, but also politically from China. Starting from 1996, all aboriginal policies were implemented and supervised by a newly established quasi-ministerial institution, the *Council of Indigenous Affairs* (Rudolph 2003b).

<sup>13</sup> See Rudolph 2004a.

particularities, including its traditional festivals and rituals. From 1994 on, the *Central Information Bureau* employed aboriginal reporters of each ethnic group that had undergone special training in filming and documentation work. Their main task was to record all political and cultural events including the festivals and rituals of their particular ethnic groups and to make these materials accessible to the public in a regular program. In order to let Chinese speaking audiences receive this program even outside the reach of the broadcasting zone – i.e., for instance on the mainland –, the texts of the program were also digitalized and emitted through the internet.<sup>14</sup> Here, the propagandist function of the internet was used in at least two ways: While such websites on one hand side served as an efficacious medium for cultural propaganda, they also pointed to the political differences between the Mainland and Taiwan where the internet had already become a symbol of democratic interaction and freedom of speech in comparison to the constant interferences and crackdowns undertaken by the KPCh against this medium.<sup>15</sup> In 1996, the *Taiwan's Ministry of Education* also started a special project with the name “Web for materials on the culture of Taiwan's Aborigines” that sponsored the establishment of internationally receivable aboriginal websites, which from now on – of course all in Chinese language – flourished on the web.<sup>16</sup> Government bodies themselves feared no costs creating colourful websites displaying aboriginal culture as a national asset, often referring to the traditional rituals and religions of these peoples in their intros and in special video files. Impressive examples are the websites of the *Taiwan International Film Festival* (TIEFF) and the *Cultural Park of the Council of Indigenous Peoples*. (Again, the video files of the latter page are only accessible for readers of Chinese).<sup>17</sup>

*By way of conclusion: The social efficacy of the representation of Aborigines' traditional religion on the internet*

The appearance of these documentations on the web is in so far remarkable as until the beginning of nativism, traditional aboriginal rituals were not very likely to be observed at all

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<sup>14</sup> See Wang Yawei 1996. As the producer of the program “Aborigines' News Magazine” (*Yuanzhumin xinwen zazhi*) Wang makes clear, this method not only guaranteed that the program could be received by aborigines in remote mountain-areas without Cable-TV: It also guaranteed that the program's messages would be “state-encroaching”. The underlying meaning of the carefully chosen term “state-encroaching” instead of “internationally receivable” becomes transparent when it is added that all materials of this program are in Chinese language.

<sup>15</sup> On this issue see for instance Robert Peters 2002.

<sup>16</sup> For these efforts to create a „*Taiwan Yuanzhumin wenhua ziliao wanglu*” see Lee 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Taiwan International Film Festival 2004; Bureau of Cultural Park of the Council of Indigenous Peoples 2004.

in Taiwan: Though they surely existed, they were only conducted privately and not in large scale collective events. Wherever aboriginal culture had not been eradicated by the “Chinese Culture Revitalization Movement” that haunted Taiwan from the 1960s to the 1980s as a reaction to Mao’s “Great Cultural Revolution”, it had been totally covered by the taboos of Christianity that had rapidly spread in Taiwan’s aboriginal society since the mid-forties. Thus, the cited websites actually present the fruits of the nativist efforts of those governmental institutions that since the beginning of the 1990s had ideologically and financially encouraged the re-enactment of the ancient rituals. As for the headhunting-ritual displayed in the school teacher’s PPT-presentation mentioned above, the scenes were taken from a cultural event that had been staged in 1991 with governmental subsidies and the help of a couple of Church elites who wanted to let their people know the history and former culture of the Truku. At that time, no one intended yet to revitalize traditional rituals. In 1999, however, there suddenly appeared so called “Collective Truku-Ancestor-gods-rituals” at the East-Coast, organized by a couple of traditionalist elites who tried to create a more effective forum for their political activities. Similar revitalization processes could simultaneously be observed in other aboriginal groups.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the encouragements from the side of Taiwanese nativism, the revival of “heretic” non-Christian cults in Taiwan’s Christianized indigenous population has its roots in numerous political, cultural as well as in habitual preconditions in aboriginal society itself. One of the reasons is that opposing political camps that ally with non-Christian religious organizations use such rituals as political tools to increase their reputation or to raise money for election campaigns.<sup>19</sup> Further, non-Christian “superstitions” are still very common in aboriginal society: They are secretly practiced whenever Western medicine fails or when the Christian church’s power is in doubt. These habitualizations are embedded into a cultural environment that is dominated by Han-Chinese and Taiwanese folk religion where shamanist practices and ancestor cults are the most normal thing of the world.

The role of medialization in the revitalization process described above should, however, not be underestimated. The representation of indigenous traditional religions in media like the internet has at least indirect effects on aboriginal society: Reconstructed traditions are presented to a Taiwanese public in a way that they will finally be considered as representative and authentic. This causes reverberations in aboriginal society in a way articulated by a young

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<sup>18</sup> From 2001-2004, I conducted fieldwork in Truku – as well as in Ami-tribes in Taiwan. In all cases, the revitalization of traditional rituals was very much linked to nativism, to elites’ competition as well as to the competition between Christian and non-Christian influences.

<sup>19</sup> See Rudolph 2005c and 2006.



traditionalist aboriginal intellectual whom I interviewed in 2004. Annoyed about the non-acceptance of traditional Ami-rituals that had recently been revitalized by young indigenous elites, he stated:

The minds of the tribes-people are simply too much colonized by the church. If the tribe's inhabitants don't want to face their cultural traditions now, they will have to do it some years later when they face the interrogations by Taiwan's Han-Chinese. These will ask them why the tribal rituals are different from those representations and descriptions that can be seen on the internet.

A further effect of medialization is that allusions to traditional religions are increasingly used as a form of "reverse symbolic violence" in circles of aboriginal elites. As the texts of the websites of Tian and Pideru cited above reveal, the allusion to differing – but allegedly righteous – value systems is also a way to cope with one's own social stigma and inferior complexes after centuries of heavy discrimination. Similarly, aboriginal intellectuals resort to traditionalist metaphors like "headhunting" in order to show one's dissatisfaction or to reinforce one's demands vis-à-vis non-aborigines. A recent example is the "Headhunting Raid Manifest" published on the internet by aboriginal legislator Gao-Jin Sumei (a female politician from the *People First Party*) in order to mobilize Taiwan's Aborigines for a demonstration against vice-president Lü Xiulian (a female politician from the *Democratic Progress Party*). The latter had dared to doubt the "indigeneity" of Taiwan's aborigines by openly referring to the Negrito-population that probably inhabited the island before the Malayo-Polynesians. The aboriginal manifest that was decorated with a picture of the "savage's knife" (*fandao*) read like this:

Think about the homeless compatriots in the catastrophic areas!  
Think about the 420 thousand compatriots that have no tomorrow!  
Think about the instructions of our ancestor-gods!  
Think about our next generation! We should feel ashamed! If we don't act now, how shall we face our ancestor-gods when we come to the rainbow bridge? (...) <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jiwas Ali (Gao-Jin Sumei) 2004. The manifest that was published on July 16, 2004, further reads: "Our opinion is: Even if Lü Xiulian apologizes, the wounds of continuing oral genocide can not be healed. (...) We propagate: Hungerstrike until the colonial government offers aborigines a reasonable treatment! We speak out the warning: No foreign government [denoting Taiwan's government that comes from the outside] can ever exploit the aborigine's right to return on the soil of the Ketagalan."

The call for the rally against vice-president Lü was followed by more than 4,000 aborigines of different ethnic groups, many of them wearing red headbands reading “oppose racism” and “headhunting raid”.<sup>21</sup>

Though it is difficult to tell to which degree the internet had a mobilizing force in this particular case, it has become clear that the web plays an important role in the representation of aboriginal religion and morals to Han people as well as to aborigines themselves. Eagerly displaying those parts of aborigine’s religious systems that can most effectively serve as subversion and antithesis to Han values, aboriginal intellectuals not only convincingly underline their own authenticity as well as their political determination, but simultaneously provide an allegedly authoritative model of their cultures – cultures that are in reality just undergoing a process of recovery and reconstruction. Quite differently from the concern that the internet might encourage the counterfeit or modification of authentic originals as it has been expressed in other contributions of this volume, such a phenomenon points to the question to which degree the internet perhaps additionally supports the monopolization of cultural production by particular societal groups.

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<sup>21</sup> See *Taipei Times* of 25.7.2004 :1. The *terminus technicus* for aboriginal head hunting in Taiwan is “*chuciao*” (literally “coming out of the grass”).

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**Map 1:** Austronesian Taiwan

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